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ABSTRACT

Exceptionally gifted children need special education because their needs are not fully met by standard educational programs. In standard programs, exceptionally gifted children waste time in acquiring basic knowledge that should be spent on more specialized knowledge, and can easily get bored and frustrated. Entry into primary school should take place when the child exhibits psychological maturity and a need to learn to read. The basic curriculum should be condensed for these students, and special attention should be given to thought analysis and to weak points such as writing and presentation. Careful consideration of extra activities, teaching methods, and social integration should also take place. The lower secondary years should offer the normal curriculum while emphasizing extra activities, an interdisciplinary approach, and the acquisition of an extensive literary background. Exceptionally gifted children in upper secondary schools should be in classes with the best pupils from the ordinary educational system. Such a system of suitable schooling from the outset would enable a large number of young people to go on to higher education at a research-oriented university and focus on genuinely academic higher education rather than tertiary studies of a more vocational nature. (JDD)

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AN EDUCATIONAL PROJECT FOR EXCEPTIONALLY GIFTED CHILDREN

by

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Exceptionally gifted children need special education. Let us first consider why this is so, then look at the different stages involved.

I. THE NEED FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

This need is due to the fact that exceptionally gifted children are different from others and are not fully catered for by standard educational programmes.

A. Why exceptionally gifted children are different

It is mainly exceptionally gifted children who do well at school that are noticed. But they account for only a third of all such children. Another third achieve inconsistent results in school, far beneath their real ability. The remaining third, paradoxically, do not do at all well at school. Academic success is therefore no criterion for defining exceptionally gifted children. What makes them gifted is their ability to understand much faster than the average child in the same circumstances. This stems from a special physiological capacity which, if all goes well, accompanies them throughout their schooling, whatever their results.

This is essential to the detection of exceptionally gifted children, a process which cannot be based on school results alone. Intelligence quotient (IQ) tests, although not perfect, are the best way of making the selection. The borderline lies between an IQ of 125 and an IQ of 130. A large majority of children whose academic achievements fall far short of their real capabilities have IQs above this level.

This is also the level above which children frequently manage to answer a question or solve a problem without really understanding their thought process, thanks to a partially unconscious system of reasoning comparable to intuition. This ability to understand things in a global way is a peculiarity which education should cater for.

In order to determine whether a child needs schooling specially designed for the exceptionally gifted, however, one should not just consider general IQ. General IQ is particularly useful in establishing what level of education is suitable for a pupil, but "performance IQ" (the non-verbal part) is decisive for predicting children's learning speed (if they start from the right level).

Finally, it must be borne in mind that mental blocks (or intensive coaching for IQ tests) can distort IQ figures, which is often the case when there are considerable discrepancies between the results of one test and those of another. If the IQ test results leave some doubt about the real ability of a child, he or she must also be tested for the psychological characteristics commonly found in exceptionally gifted children, as established, inter alia, by Paul MERCHAT and Philippe CHAMONT.

B. The unsuitability of standard education

The teaching generally provided in schools is unsuitable for exceptionally gifted children for several reasons.

First of all, they understand faster and can easily get bored, which results in a feeling of frustration at not learning more. They also often get used to not having to try, which can do them harm in their subsequent school careers.

Furthermore, the time they waste in acquiring basic knowledge means that these children subsequently have to assimilate too much knowledge of too specialised a kind in higher education, which impairs their ability to pursue their own thinking and research.

Giving exceptionally gifted children a one- or two-year start early in their school careers is not an acceptable solution, for the speed at which they learn soon gives rise to new problems. Moreover, the intellectual superiority of gifted children is not generally accompanied by greater psychological maturity, and this makes it difficult for such children to establish satisfactory relations with the older pupils in their class.

All these difficulties obviously occur again when a child misses out a school year. This may also leave gaps in the child's knowledge that can resurface at a later stage.

Only an educational programme specially designed for exceptionally gifted children can therefore solve the problem.

II. PRIMARY SCHOOL

a. Entry

The child should go to primary school as soon as he or she feels the need to learn to read. If this ideal time to learn to read is missed, the delay can be unpleasant for the child and cause personality disorders and a loss of interest in school.

The psychological maturity of the child must also be taken into account, however. In most cases, exceptionally gifted children should start primary schooling between four-and-a-half and six years of age.

b. Ordinary curricula

Exceptionally gifted children should acquire all the basic knowledge imparted to other children but their faster learning speed should be taken into account. The normal five-year curriculum should therefore be condensed into four years.

Special attention should be given to what are often weak points in exceptionally gifted children, namely writing (the mind works too fast for the hand to follow) and presentation (gifted children neglect such things as form).

In all subjects, intensive coaching in analysis should be provided, even though it may seem tedious. Exceptionally gifted children must learn to analyse their thought processes by depicting them in diagramatic form, for example. The teacher should always ask them to explain how they reached this or that solution.

c. Extra activities

Exceptionally gifted children often have much greater facility in scientific subjects (where logic counts) than in literary subjects (where memory is more important). To avoid an imbalance, they should therefore be given extra work in literary subjects, particularly those which make the most demands on the memory, such as the learning of vocabulary.

III. SECONDARY EDUCATION

a. Lower secondary schooling

Since upper secondary schooling offers exceptionally gifted children study courses more or less in keeping with their capabilities, lower secondary schools must provide them with the basis they need in order to derive maximum benefit from their subsequent studies.

The duration of lower secondary studies should therefore continue to be the standard four years. In addition to the normal curriculum, however, the extra activities begun at primary school should be developed. Other subjects of a scientific nature, such as computer science, may be added. Particular attention should be given, however, to the acquisition of an extensive literary background.

In the traditional subjects, teachers should adhere to the standard syllabus, while demanding complete mastery thereof.

An interdisciplinary approach should be adopted to demonstrate the importance of each subject individually and in relation to every other subject. It is particularly important that pupils be made to understand that the same rules of logic apply in all subjects. These rules, which are essential for later studies, may be studied in a thorough manner, for exceptionally gifted children have very logical minds.

In the same way, analytical methods must be studied in so far as they apply to the different subjects taught, with a view to developing the analytical powers that are often inadequate in exceptionally gifted children.

b. Upper secondary schooling

It is not absolutely necessary to provide special courses for exceptionally gifted pupils in upper secondary schools. In France, the courses leading to the school-leaving certificates in mathematics and physics (Baccalaureate C) and mathematics and technology (Baccalaureate E) are fairly well-suited to the abilities of exceptionally gifted pupils.

There is, however, a need for other Baccalaureate courses of an equivalent level with different major subjects: economics, literary subjects, biology and so on.

This would be easier if exceptionally gifted pupils were given prior coaching to enable them to attain a high level in all subjects.

Such a system would, moreover, prevent selection being based almost exclusively on performance in mathematics, as it currently is.

Exceptionally gifted children in upper secondary schools would thus be in classes with the best pupils from the ordinary educational system, which should not give rise to too many problems.

IV. HIGHER EDUCATION

Suitable schooling from the outset would enable a large number of exceptionally gifted young people to go on to higher education with a better grounding.

It would thus be possible to re-establish a research-oriented university of a level equivalent to the French "grandes écoles". This university, which would be attended by exceptionally gifted students, should be separate from the other branches of higher education. The students themselves and society as a whole would benefit by this distinction between genuinely academic higher education and tertiary studies of a more directly vocational nature.

In a world where high-level skills are in increasing demand, this reform should be treated as a necessity.